John Davies

John Davies is an Australian born classical singer, concert artist and recording artist whose large and versatile baritone voice is known for its dark, bronzy depth and its bright and penetrating upper register. While the voice has been described as overwhelmingly dramatic,[4] it has the ease and flexibility of lighter coloratura voices which allows for legitimate performance of the bel canto repertoire.

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Early Years

Growing up in a household where there was no stop music, either radio or records, pop or classical, John Davies was naturally inclined towards an understanding of music. At age 7 he invented his own way of writing music, which he discovered was much more complicated than conventional musical notation when he commenced learning music at age 9 from his older brother, Peter. In the 6th grade he was selected along with two other students from grade school, Gary Webster and Cannan Middletton, to be a soloist, singing in front of a large choir in large shopping malls in Australia similar to Glandore Galleries or American Carillon.

He commenced formal music training on the clarinet, studying with Gary Mathesson of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. In the 10th Grade (sixth form) year he started what was to become a 8-piece band which played covers. In the 11th Grade, the band won a contract to play music for TV shows produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation – ABC. The band lasted through the first year of college at which time it split up. Davies had commenced working freelance as a musician with a number of bands which kept him working sometimes five nights a week. He also worked in orchestras for Broadway Musicals.

He had studied theory and composition and continued this into college where he received high distinction grades in harmony and composition, even though he was a foreign languages and educational psychology major. At the request of John (Jack) Gordon,[5] he composed a series of suites for carillon to be performed on carillons in Sydney and the national capital, Canberra. He was also a member of the madrigal society and it was here that he decided that he should at least attempt to be a singer.

After one year of vocal training, he started to get experience in student and amateur productions of operas, oratorios, operettas and musical comedy where he experienced some measure of audience approval of his fledgling craft.

1980s – 1990s

In 1981, as a student of Marjorie Sheppard,[6] he graduated as a Licentiate of Trinity College, London – with a vocal performance specialization. He immediately commenced his preparation for The Royal Schools of Music where he later also graduated as a Licentiate. He knew that as a baritone, he was still too young to seriously compete with older classical baritones, so he commenced working with pianist Graham Mackay, singing lounge bar repertoire in 5-star hotels. With Mackay, he did night shows in the lounges of Rydeys, The Intercontinental and The Ritz Carlton, where he was later employed as artistic director.

In 1983, he finished his training at the Australasian Academy of Music, based in Sydney Opera House. During his time there he received instruction from some of Australia’s greatest operatic performers. He considers receiving words of advice and encouragement from the late Dame Joan Sutherland (with whom he maintained ongoing correspondence) to be pivotal in his performing career. He also enjoyed a long friendship with the highly acclaimed maestro soprano Heather Begg, whom he also met while attending the academy. It was Begg who convinced him to give singing lessons.

In 1984, following the advice of Begg, he opened a singing studio in the center of the city. As he was becoming quite well-known as a concert artist, he soon had a full roster of students, many of whom have continued on into solid careers in Europe and the USA. Not all of his students were singing classical. As he himself had spent several years singing the lounge repertoire, it was not difficult for him to instruct and demonstrate in all genres. He was often in front of the microphone, largely for broadcasts and cabaret and 5-star shows, and was able to give useful instruction in recording studio procedure and microphone technique – to the end that a large number of his students became professional recording artists themselves.

For several years he honed his skills as a soloist singing largely oratorio, Lieder and operatic roles. He gave many performances of Handel’s Messiah, The St. Matthew Passion (Bach), Ovieto Calvary (Maundr), the Mozart Requiem and numerous others, and he included songs cycles and art songs in many of his concerts. During this time he had commenced coaching with the late Jack Metz – formerly of The Metropolitan Opera, New York. He was with Metz that he studied the operatic repertoire, and he acquired all of the skills which classical singers require to routinely perform their work.

In 1987 he applied for the position of Artistic Director of the City of Sydney Ensemble, the city’s only official, and pre-eminent, vocal performance ensemble and in the same year the Ensemble commenced giving concerts to the people of Sydney at the prestigious Sydney Town Hall – the spiritual home of classical music in Australia. He particularly enjoyed performing there for recordings and broadcasts because of the fine auditorium. In 1988 the ensemble was appointed to deliver the official Australian Bicentennial Opera Recital Series. With various line-ups of singers, the ensemble variously recorded the operatic extracts throughout the nation. The ensemble continued its annual Galas Performances for the people of Sydney well into the nineties.

In 1989, composer Christopher Leachman composed a lengthy song-cyle for Davies’ voice based on the Shakespearean sonnets which deal with the subject of ‘Time’. This received its debut at Sydney Town Hall in 1991, but with Davies conducting, the vocal content being allocated to various other singers.

The early nineties were largely spent giving concerts, and vocal instruction. However, he became very interested in an emerging technology that could change the way we experience music. An MP3 player could store many hours of music on a single disc. The early and intermediate models were not very practical for something like a long operatic work, but with time, the technology improved to the point where it became possible to store entire operatic works on a single disc.

Also during the early 90s, he started working with a new vocal coach, European conductor, Brian Stanborough, with whom he strongly connected. He recorded an opera album – a collection of operatic arias, and on it used this new technology to store as many songs as possible on one disc. This was the first time that a digital medium was used to record an entire opera album. It received a great deal of press, and won several awards, including one from the American Baritone Society.

In 1998, having given a very large number of concerts and recorded many volumes, he embarked on a project to record the voice of the great Italian tenor, Enrico Caruso to its original form as it would have been heard on the stage. This involved Davies in a great number of experiments with soft wear algorithms. By 2001, he still had not come up with a result that he considered valid. His goal was not to add to what Caruso had sung. It was to retrospectively compensate for inadequacies of technology throughout history which had resulted in nothing but poor reproductions of Caruso’s performances. He designed revolutionary new ways to apply various algorithms to the original sounds of Caruso, and while meeting with certain successes, he found that the programs which existed were not up to the task of returning Caruso to the stage – at least any with validity. He continued working on the soft wear, and in late 2009, after many experiments which he saw as failures, he set up a new experiment, the Listening computer project, and using one of the two musical geniuses of the recording world, Davies had worked out how to manipulate some thus far unexplained algorithms and apply them to the human voice via some new soft wear which Golightly had recently acquired at his workshop. Finally, after eleven years, with the tap of an ‘enter’ key, Davies and Golightly heard the voice of Caruso as it was heard by live audiences of the very early 20th century. The Caruso project is still a work in progress and the results are not available at this time.

2000s – present

Early in 2000, he was selected by The Shanghai Broadcasting Network – SBN[7] to be the male representative of Western classical music in the Cross Year 2000 program. It was an innovative concert which saw him performing live on stage at the Sydney Opera House while being accompanied by an orchestra which was playing stringed at Shanghai Grand Theatre. In one song, he sang opposite Yao Wen, China’s biggest pop star at the time. His voice was described in the Chinese press as “an awesome vocal force of powerful and unstoppable momentum”.[8] Also in that year, he was elected as his community representative to run with the Olympic Torch on the opening day of the Year 2000 Olympic Games. With that, he became the first opera singer in history to be an Olympic Torchbearer.[9]

In 2002, Davies and Kazaa.com negotiations commenced for some of his recordings to be made available online. Late in 2003, he became the first classical musician to have his recordings readily available over the internet. It was the fledgling days of music on the net and the result was not to be fully tested. Heavy metal band Metallica sued Napster when the band discovered that a demo of their song “Disappear” had been circulating over the net, before it had been released.[10] Davies foresaw this problem and released material which he considered to be non-commercial. The results of having such a wide audience were, in his opinion, astounding, especially in view of the material’s relative novelty in the normal market place.

Also in 2002, he undertook a project to record the “24 Italian Songs and Arias of the 17th and 18th Centuries”.[11] This song collection is the standard collection used by students worldwide in their vocal lessons. Davies noted that there was no single recording of this book. There were numerous recordings of various parts of the collection, but none of them was faithful to the Schirmer collection. Not satisfied to simply record the book and publish the recording, Davies arranged all of the songs for various combinations of instruments typical of the period. After lengthy research, he commenced recording the instrumental accompaniments, and in 2006, he recorded a live concert of the entire collection in Europe. The collection is now sold by some forty online music stores and ironically, one of them is Napster – in its new form.[12]

In the mid 2000s, he re-arranged the orchestral arrangements of his 24 Songs and Arias so that they could be used by all categories of voices. He recorded these and released them in 2007 – online, so that students worldwide could download the accompaniment tracks to songs then teachers require them to learn for their lessons. These have proved to be popular.

Most of 2009 and 2010 was spent re-locating permanently to the USA. However, he and his associate Golightly, ran a lengthy series of experiments on developing a light, portable off-site recording system which could record on location with perfect sound integrity. While Davies was giving a series of Summer Schools at the prestigious Columbia School of Music in Downtown Los Angeles, he and Golightly held various trials of several systems which they had devised, to varying degrees of success, however, Davies considered them to be failures. But, by early in 2011, they had developed a ½ integrity, stand-alone system which can record sound and music and carry out complete post-production as well as the Amazon Basin as it can in a concert hall, and the system is light weight at approximately 5 kilograms or eleven pounds. This system is not Firewire dependent.

Recordings

* Figaro, Tevador and the Other Usual Suspects – Operatic Arias for Dramatic Baritone (current project).
* Bardi Requiem (adaptable from original tapes) imminent release 2011
* 24 Italian Songs and Arias of the 17th and 18th Centuries – high keys backing tracks
* 24 Italian Songs and Arias of the 17th and 18th Centuries – low keys backing tracks
* 24 Italian Songs and Arias of the 17th and 18th Centuries – live concert
* Norma – Berlin, excerpts
* Stalin Mater – Pergolesi (producer)
* Concerto for Tuba – Proctor (producer)
* Requiem – Mozart
* Verdi Requiem – MP3 dedicated format
As Producer/Vocals Producer
Mark Gardner  Your Favourite Hymns
Paige Delaney  Moby
Sam Swan  Drivin’ My Car
Talitha Mitchell  Talitha Mix
Fi Telford  Ugly
Sharan Stewart  When I Fall
Jimmy Vargas and the Black Dahlia’s – El Torchtura

Writings
"Performance Practices of the Kwajo and Lauauai Peoples of Langu Langu Laguen" 1993 – USyd; USP
"Cantus Mariae” Celebratory Music for the Canonization of The Blessed Mary MacKillop” 1997 – 1999

Awards
Omni Foundation, Los Angeles, Classical Music Award.
Appointed “Voice of the Western World” – Peoples Republic of China
Olympic Torchbearer Medallion
Australian Bicentennial Gold Medallion
Presented International Musician of the Year 2003 Award, IBC Cambridge, by Prime Minister, John Howard.
Graduate of The Royal Schools of Music
Graduate of Trinity College, London

References
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